

Leisure, Idleness, and Virtuous Activity in Shakespearean Drama  
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The *topoi* leisure and idleness abound in Shakespearean drama in complex manifestations, replete with class and gender inflections. The privileged term, leisure, modeled after Greek *skolé*, refers to the “opportunity afforded by freedom from occupations” (OED 2a), as enjoyed by the nobles who, excused from sustenance labor, could ideally devote themselves to “the development of virtue and the performance of political duties” (Aristotle, *Politics* VII.9.1328b33-a2). The second term, idleness, targeting class and gender inferiors, connotes inertia, indolence, overindulgence, and triviality, readily associated with unemployment and the less strenuous activities of domestic work. Thus, when Flavius scolds a group of commoners loitering in public as “idle creatures” (*Julius Caesar*, 1.1.1),<sup>1</sup> he means that the mechanicals are “unemployed” or “not engaged in work” (OED 4a), insinuating “laziness” and “indolence” (OED 6). Shakespeare further mines the multivalence of “idleness” in *Antony and Cleopatra*. When Cleopatra objects to Antony’s return to Rome, expressing she is “all forgotten,” Antony quips, “But that your royalty/ Holds idleness your subject, I should take you/ For idleness itself.” (1.3.92-94). Here, “idleness” implies not only that Cleopatra lacks meaningful occupation, but also that her complaint, from Antony’s perspective of pursuing state matters of *gravitas*, is “empty”; “ineffective, worthless, ... vain, frivolous, trifling”; “foolish, silly, incoherent; ...delirious; and, finally, “baseless, groundless” (OED 1, 2a-c). In a third usage of “idleness,” when the Athenian couples in *Midsummer Night’s Dream* confront love troubles in the forest, they experience firsthand the dangers, illusions, and vanities of “love-in-idleness” (2.1.180). Here, Shakespeare draws on the Ovidian connection of idleness with fleshly delight, as conveyed by the medieval tradition of the garden of love, notably guarded by Oiseuse in the *Romance de la Rose*, and signified by the conventional Gothic symbols of *luxuria*, the mirror and the comb (Vickers 118). As these examples indicate, Shakespeare draws on a rich classical discourse of idleness and leisure, the discussion of which will aid our understanding of how he borrows from and revises past uses of these *topoi* towards further aesthetic and ethical aims.

As Julia Bondanella explains, the specialized Greek and Latin conceptions of idleness and leisure differ widely in their connotations. While the “Greek *skolé* refers to a meaningful experience in which the mind is exercised on the liberal arts in order to contemplate truth and to achieve some concrete good in the world” (15, n. 9), the Roman *otium* reveals “a long, ambivalent history, with definitions ranging from the idleness that encourages vice to a condition in which one cultivates intellectual or spiritual gifts to achieve virtue” (14). Specifically, *otium* is time free from work (*labor*), from business dealings (*negotium*), from the performance of duties (*officia*), or from political, administrative, or military service. But it is also defined by the élite in relation to how the non-élite are thought to spend (or indeed waste) their free time: a wise man’s *otium* is empty of work and other obligations but full of purposeful and productive contemplation, rest, or literary activity” (Connors 493, André 21).

Because citizens often lacked the wherewithal to spend “time at one’s own disposal” (OED 3a) in productive and worthy ways, the word became more often associated with “idleness, laziness, luxuriousness, and voluptuousness” (Bondanella 15).

The first recorded use of *otium*, in Ennius’ *Iphigenia* (c. 190 BC), reveals soldiers expressing their restlessness and boredom during a respite from fighting. To wit, they “distinguish between *otium negotiosum*, leisure with a satisfying occupation ... and *otium otiosum*, unoccupied and pointless leisure” (Vickers 6). According to Cato, the famous moralist, farmer, lawyer, orator, and general, unproductive *otium* was “unworthy of a Roman, who should be busy and avoid the temptations of the easy life, which, for many Romans, meant “*otium Graecum*, Roman prejudice against the [defeated] Greeks ascribing to them the antithesis of their own *virtus*”: “The Greeks were over-talkative, guilty of *levitas* (frivolity), softness, laziness, being dedicated to purely intellectual activities without practical outcome” (Vickers 7). In the context of statecraft, *otium*, meaning civil peace, was a legitimate and desirable goal for states overly involved in internal and external strife, but a wholesome and productive peace within the polity was difficult to maintain. In his speech *Pro Rhodiensibus*, Cato expresses a view, endorsed later by Cicero, Livy, Seneca, and Tacitus (32-36), that “too much prosperity would lead to *superbia* and *luxuria*, an associations of vices which would cause a people’s decline” (7). Indeed, *otium* came to be widely regarded as a cause of all evil, bringing on a chain of perceived vices — luxury, self-indulgence, pleasure, idleness, and wantonness. These vices induced a person’s

physical and moral degeneration, lessened against through Cato's metaphor of corrosive rust for inactivity or through milder language of being "softened by luxury" (8,7,32).

Because of its potential for abuse, Roman *otium* presents itself largely in admonitory terms, and those who used it in honorable ways had to invoke exceptions. Cicero defended his political inactivity during his exile through the fruits of his *otium honestum* for the benefit of others: his works in philosophy and rhetoric which subsequently catalyzed Renaissance humanist thought (10). Besides the writers' invocation of *otium literatum* (lettered ease) as honorable use of free time (Bondanella 19), politicians who have contributed to public service might invoke *otium cum dignitate*, by which "aristocratic republicans [may claim they] have earned *dignitas* or public renown by their efforts for the republic as a whole and should now be able to enjoy the *otium* [albeit productive] which goes with a state running smoothly" (Vickers 9).

The widely cautionary attitude towards *otium* continued into the Christian Middle Ages and the Renaissance as Jerome to Spenser regarded *otium* as a *radix malorum*, "the enemy of virtue, the associate of all forms of sin" (Vickers 116), if misused. At a macrocosmic level, Machiavelli, drawing on Polybius, pointedly places *otium* ("quiet," "idleness") at the core of a cyclical rise and fall of nations: "Warre begetteth quiet, quiet occasioneth idlenesse, Idleness breedeth disorder, Disorder maketh ruine: Likewise of ruine growth order, order virtue, and of virtue, glorie with good fortune" (V, i; p. 111); [qtd. in Vickers 137]. At a microcosmic level, Edmund Spenser, in Book I of *The Faerie Queene*, presents *otium* ("ease") as a danger to Red Cross through assonance and rhyme: "Sleepe after toile, port after stormie seas,/ Ease after warre, death after life does greatly please" (1.4.40). This "invitation to rest, to indulge the senses," as Vickers emphatically notes, "is tantamount to suicide" (149).

One would infer from these reverberations an almost univocal censure of *otium* were it not for the Roman poets who sought *otium* as the necessary condition for pursuing love and for writing elegiacs on love. The most famous of these, Ovid, overturned standard conceptions of *otium* and love as inactive by emphasizing its need for activity: "Inertia may be the characteristic of the lover viewed from the perspective of public morality, but within the love affair he must be anything but passive" (Vickers 21). Whereas even Ovid, unable to free himself from Roman *gravitas*, both celebrated and denounced *otium* (24), the Renaissance seized on Ovidian vitality and transgression of conventional morality, evident in his love treatises and poetry as well as in

*Metamorphoses*, to construct the chief countermodel against the dominant, androcentric ideal of martial and civic action.

Depicting both dominant and resistant ethical discourses in his drama, Shakespeare presents a complex exploration of idleness, leisure, and virtuous activity. Reflecting the Roman teachings influential during the Renaissance, the dominant, androcentric view in Shakespearean drama, on the one hand, extols martial and civil activity over “idleness,” the negative facet of Roman *otium*. At the same time, by revising this concept within its particular uses, Shakespeare recuperates the activity of the economically and sexually disenfranchised—women and the working class. Shakespeare, on the other hand, endorses aristocratic leisure, the positive facet of *otium*—but this support is critically qualified. Subtly criticizing the nobles’ potential to abuse an inherited, not merited prerogative of leisure, Shakespeare holds them more stringently to its “purposeful and productive” use within the classical context of public service. In this manner Shakespeare’s plays deftly revise the dominant early modern ideology of work, privileging male over female, noble over commoner, to validate less visible, internal activity alongside privileged physical, external activity.

Both women and the working class comprise two groups of people largely excluded from the classical ideal of activity as martial valor and political occupation, the first by way of prohibition and the second by way of misconstrual. In an alliance of class and gender inferiors, Shakespeare presents two correlated correctives to the ancient and Renaissance ideal of civic and martial activity. One valorizes feminine idleness, as epitomized by Cleopatra and Virgilia, as the locus of vital internal and domestic life instead of seeming inactivity or passivity. The other, in juxtaposing patrician leisure against plebeian laziness, validates the plebeians’ and the mechanicals’ earnest work over aristocratic idleness in *Coriolanus* and *Midsummer Night’s Dream*, respectively. Through these counterresponses, leisure is no longer simply the time, often misused, for male gentility to train for martial and political activity, but rather extended to include the “the business of [the] soul” (*Othello*, 3.3.185), domestic bonding, and community building in which especially women and commoners participate through their daily work and holiday reveling.

## I.

Among the women living in the heroic worlds of Shakespearean drama, notably Portia, Cleopatra, and Virgilia of the Roman tragedies react to the exclusion from the masculine sphere

of laudable activity in diverse ways. Portia, excluded from Brutus's confidence and thereby the conspiratorial intrigue of male politics, achieves recognition within the Roman heroic society as an honorary male only at the price of life—through her Stoic act of suicide. Although also ultimately taking her life in the “high Roman fashion” (*Antony and Cleopatra* 4.16.89), Cleopatra demonstrates throughout the play a deft integration of feminine and masculine, emotional and martial modes of action, culminating in her heroic death. In Cleopatra's circumstance, female subordination underscores the dependent status of Egypt to Rome. As a tributary ruler, Cleopatra tries to deploy feminine wiles to political advantage—all in vain. Antony, taken suddenly by a mood of Roman *gravitas*, sees Cleopatra's otherwise charming actions of “infinite variety” (2.2.241) as idleness—empty, vain, trifling, and foolish (OED 1, 2a-b). According to Roman ethics, strength, “if unused, easily melts into softness and impotence” (Vickers 32). Immersed in the pleasures of love at the Egyptian court, Antony is called back to Rome and all she stands for—male hardness and activity. Heeding the Roman censure against *otium*, he realizes: “These strong Egyptians fetters I must break,/ Or lose myself in dotage” (1.2.105-06), in which case, “Ten thousand harms more than the ills I know/ My idleness [will] hatch” (118-19). Clouded by Roman ideology, Antony mistakenly sees Cleopatra as harmful to his Roman honor when she, in fact, has aided him all along to achieve what is ultimately more satisfying than the narrow life of *virtus*: a complete life integrating duty and love, honor and power. But as a tributary ruler and a woman, Cleopatra's power is painfully circumscribed.

Though Antony and other Romans would accuse Cleopatra of idleness, her inactivity is not one of her making, but rather one imposed upon her by her sex and by political dependency. Appearing censurably “idle” to Roman eyes, Cleopatra's epicurean lifestyle and extravagant play of passions are largely means to stave off the boredom of political exclusion. The Roman tendency myopically to regard the effect rather than the larger external cause of Cleopatra's idleness disables them also from understanding her potent inner life. Cleopatra's “idleness” expresses the frustrations of a tributary ruler treated as a casualty in the strategies of male politics, “esteemed as nothing” in the light of “a great cause” (1.2.127): her sexual inferiority contributes to and reinforces her political dependency as Egypt. Conflating sexual and political discourses, Cleopatra's “tawny front” (1.1.6) casting a “shadow” on Antony's “sun” (4.16.9) encapsulates the Roman critique against “private life, effeminacy, selfishness, idleness and vice” in favor of “public life, manliness, virtue, hard work” (Vickers 25).

Instead of contemptible inactivity, Cleopatra's "idleness" reveals itself as bounded vitality and powerful sentience in her pursuit of love and power combined, that "heavenly mingle" (1.5.58). Our modern discourse, influenced by the classical and Protestant bias towards visible, external industry, perhaps lacks sufficient language to discuss the potent operations of the inner life in their rapport with external action. Aristotle's virtue ethics, with its integration of worthy aim and effective response (affect and/or action) towards that end, may be of use in this discussion of Cleopatra's "idleness." Judging by Antony's later action of reuniting with Cleopatra and proclaiming her and their children rulers of the East (3.6.9-16), Cleopatra, in act 1 seems to have reacted to Antony's departure with the right degree of affect combined with deferential submission to—hence, non-action against—his decided course of action. Cleopatra's emotional restraint and endurance of inactivity is the right response of "sensation, reason, desire," the "three things in the soul," according to Aristotle, "which control action and truth" (*Nicomachean Ethics*, henceforth *NE*, VI.2.1139a16). In choosing this response, Cleopatra displays the mark of the virtuous person: practical wisdom, or the ability "to deliberate well about what is good *and* expedient for himself" (VI.5.1140a25-27; my italics). This calculation of moral action based on "ratiocinative desire" (VI.2.1139a4)—the integrated operation of both intellect and emotion—is not easy, and demands, as Cleopatra briefly hints, "sweating labour/ To bear so near the heart" (1.3.95-96). Expanded in these terms, Cleopatra's action in inaction, preparing for her future political participation, is not so alien from the Roman conception of "purposeful and productive" *otium*.

Whereas a moral system like the Roman one based on discipline and restraint, honor and shame, conceives value through pain and forbearance, Cleopatra is the integration of Eastern and Western thought, an incarnation of the Egyptian-Greco hermetic and neoplatonic traditions, in which apparent diversities are manifestations of the One (Wind 42). In this dispensation, dualities of the Roman world—play and work, mirth and grief, idleness and "sweating labour"—as Cleopatra vividly enacts them, are part and parcel of a cohesive "becoming" (1.3.97), all affirmed as ongoing vital motion and emotion towards the fulfillment of complete life. Cleopatra's failure at deflecting Antony in act 1 from the narrow Roman path of imperial glory eventually leads to brief, exquisite scenes of "heavenly mingle" in act 4, where, through the arming of Antony, she and the Roman general together in a victory against Caesar become the *Venus armata* (Wind 85-87), fusing love and honor, affect and action, personal and civic

fulfillment. Cleopatra is the divinely variable and multivalent “grave charm” (4.13.25), who, through her vitality in idleness, is more constant to the ideals of the complete life and Roman constancy than Antony ever was.

Cleopatra, as a tragic hero with unavoidable flaws, also illustrates the idea that time can be better spent in suspended idleness than in activity badly executed. Whereas in her eagerness to participate after long idleness, she erroneously insists that the battle of Actium be fought at sea, her familiar arena, against Caesar’s formidable fleet, Cleopatra, in act 5, through an act of feminine frivolousness, buys idleness to execute her defiance against Octavius in a death act consummately fusing masculine and feminine, Roman heroic ethos and Egyptian mythologies of the life circle.

Like Cleopatra, who shows the value in non-active waiting, Virgilia, in *Coriolanus*, demonstrates *otium honestum* (besides the Miltonian idea that those who wait patiently also serve): she serves the state through her unflinching dedication to the hearth and the peaceful life, a subtle but solid counterresponse to the hypermasculine militancy of Rome. As Aristotle states, “men must be able to engage in business and go to war, but leisure and peace are better...” (*Politics* VII.14.1333b). Soft-spoken Virgilia is often interpreted in criticism as the cipher character of the silent, submissive wife. I argue, however, that through her insistent femininity and protection of the domestic sphere, she is Shakespeare’s conscientious objector against Rome’s hypermasculine ideology. “No less than seven times in about forty lines does she refuse to accompany Volumnia and Valeria out of doors” (Miola 172), steadfastly guarding the hearth. She is the voice of human sentience and nurturing in an environment where the norm, even among women with their traditionally readier access to feeling, is to regard cruel violence as a sign of nobility: besides the notorious example of Volumnia relishing the bloody badges of wounds, Valeria admiringly recounts how Coriolanus’s son, “a noble child,” viciously “mammocked” (1.3.61) a butterfly in play. In contrast, Virgilia, in her closed and reticent manner, ardently protects domesticity and the bonds and feelings inhabiting that space. Though Coriolanus calls Virgilia, “My gracious silence” (2.1.161), it is less to signify wifely subjection than the feminine complement to his martial austerity. In this respect, she is the play’s model of virtuous moderation, passionately defending the hearth while enduring her husband’s martial and civic endeavors pacifically, not passively. In the sheer lack of critical attention given to the conventionally demure Virgilia, overshadowed by the more forceful characters, scholarship has

neglected her courageous forbearance in Coriolanus's absence and in single-handedly resisting hegemonic masculinity.<sup>2</sup>

## II.

Besides this gender revision to early modern privileging of martial heroics and civic industry, Shakespeare exposes the association of these ideals with the upper class by upholding the plebeians' and the mechanicals' earnest work over aristocratic leisure in *Coriolanus* and *Midsummer Night's Dream*, respectively. In the Roman tragedy, the plebeians are presented, from the patrician view, as mediocre in courage and intelligence by their very nature. Yet it is the lack of leisure, the "time to be educated into civil society, time to participate in deliberation" (Barber 141), that makes them ill-suited for civic participation rather than what the patricians believe, a natural incompetence. Indeed, despite their need for further civic training, the plebeians, in their initial discussion of whether to endorse Coriolanus, exhibit the ability to deliberate and argue both sides of the issue. Their potential for civic participation is furthermore evidenced historically in the "civic politics of the 204 towns and cities throughout England" incorporated by 1610, which "enjoyed a degree of legislative autonomy and civic jurisdiction" (Shrank 408).

Nonetheless, the pre-eminent patrician, Coriolanus, regarding them as "the mutable rank-scented meinie" (3.1.70), "love[s] them as they weigh" (2.2.69), pushing the virtue-challenged to prove their worth. He stresses in this regard that the state dispensation of corn was *not* a reward for the plebeians' cowardly martial effort at Corioles. This situation counterposes two divergent perspectives on civic duties and benefits: social entitlement vs. merit. In Coriolanus's hard-line view, though patricians gain their enormous economic and political entitlements largely through birth, the plebeians must *earn* their meager allotments, but because of their cowardice, "Did not deserve corn gratis" (3.1.128). His rigorous martial standards exact an effort equal to his from those with less moral luck, i.e., without the mental and physical capacities and socio-economic privileges conducive to the virtue he himself has attained.<sup>3</sup> Unlike Antony's magnanimity towards his men, Coriolanus holds "a lofty bearing ... among humble people [which] is as vulgar as a display of strength against the weak" (Aristotle, *NE*, IV.3.1124b22-23).

It does not dawn on Coriolanus, with his lack of social imagination, that with more food in their bellies, the plebeian soldiers might have shown more heart to fight. Indeed, the rabble-



rousing First Citizen complains about the constant state—in war and peace alike—of being eaten though themselves starved: “If the wars eat us not up, [the patrician rapacious belly] will; and there’s all the love they bear us” (1.1.75). In contrast, the patricians—with fuller bellies, the motivation to protect their estates, and the martial training bestowed upon a warrior class—would presumably demonstrate better soldiership on the battlefield. In spheres of peace, however, the patricians exhibit nobility only in the social sense—without demonstrating the moral excellence constitutive of the Greek *aristoi*.

As Andrew Gurr, Arthur Riss, and others have argued, *Coriolanus* instantiates “a decline in the ideological persuasiveness of the belly metaphor” (Riss 71, n. 3), undercutting a “natural” correspondence “between the hierarchical unity of the human body and the feudalistic organization of the ruling political body” (Riss 53). Indeed, Menenius’s telling of the belly parable of act 1, scene 1 to appease the plebeians is a distortion of the Platonic tripartite body politic, by which the ruling class, designating its head, overextends its physiological functions and boundaries and, contrary to its characterizing rational faculty, rapaciously occupies the belly, home of the lower appetites. According to Menenius, the condescending answer of the “good belly” (1.1.137), representing the “fat and prosperous” senators of Rome, is that through “Their counsels and their cares, ... Touching the weal o’th’ common, .../ No public benefit which you receive/ But it proceeds or comes from them to you,/ And no way from yourselves” (139-43)—similar to the ideology of the feudal aristocratic system by which lords collected tithes from their vassals and serfs. By virtue of their famished condition, the plebeians’ view of the “cormorant belly... the sink o’th’body” (110-11) as “idle and unactive,/ Still cupboarding the viand, never bearing/ Like labour with the rest” (88-90) seems more accurate. Contrary to Coriolanus’s condemnation of the plebeians, a more objective view reveals the laziness of the patrician leisure class juxtaposed against a plebeian class, i.e., tradesmen, who, in having to work for their livelihood, still cannot feed themselves because the patricians presumably are selling corn at exorbitant prices.

While the patrician-warriors fight against foreign enemies to defend Rome in order to protect their estates, in times of peace they show little concern for common good, the welfare of the plebeians. As the First Citizen protests,

Care for us! True, indeed! They ne’er cared for us yet: suffer us to famish, and their store-houses crammed with grain; make edicts for usury, to support usurers; repeal daily any

wholesome act established against the rich, and provide more piercing statutes daily, to chain up and restrain the poor. If the wars eat us not up, they will; and there's all the love they bear us. (1.1.70-76)

Coriolanus, less than two hundred lines later in sarcastic contempt toward the plebeians, bears out the truth of this statement: “The Volsces have much corn; take these rats thither/ To gnaw their garners. Worshipful mutiners,/ Your valour puts well forth: pray, follow” (1.1.240-42). In a civic state like the republic that Rome is trying to establish, the Haves, in the name of the public good, should ensure that reasonably working citizens do not go hungry. Instead, Coriolanus sardonically invites the plebeians to appease their hunger by taking from the Volsces—by looting their supplies or by treasonously joining their side. Neither way is savory. This baiting by Coriolanus not only reveals his lack of moral decency, but also foreshadows his own subsequent changing of sides. Coriolanus’s repulsion toward the plebeians to distinguish himself from the common herd ironically undermines the very virtue that he so inflexibly tries to uphold.

The attitude of Theseus and his party towards the mechanicals in *Midsummer Night’s Dream* further belies the “natural” superiority of the noble class over the working class. In response to the tradesmen’s “lamentable comedy” of Pyramus and Thisbe, which they present in honor of their ruler’s marriage, Theseus’s party lacks the good graces to acknowledge their earnest efforts and instead mock the performance as “the silliest stuff that [they] ever heard” (5.1.207), poking fun at the inept literalness of all the characters. Despite his ostensible professions of lordly benevolence in his words, “For never anything can be amiss,/ When simpleness and duty tender it” (5.1.82-83), Theseus does not follow through with this adage. He makes a half-hearted gesture to defend the mechanicals’ overly literal acting: “The best in this kind are but shadows, and the worst are no worse, if imagination amend them.... If we imagine no worse of them than they of themselves, they may pass for excellent men” (5.1.211-12). It is not aesthetic imagination, as Theseus and Hippolyta believe, that could transform the actors into noble men, but rather *social* imagination that could transform the mechanicals into excellent citizens.

Like Coriolanus, Theseus and his party fail to show “noble respect” (5.1.91) towards the mechanicals’ gesture of homage. The mechanicals, naïvely thinking that their “realist” performance will frighten the noble ladies, dispel all theatrical representation with their literalness by making metadramatic confessions such as “the lantern doth the horned moon

present” (5.1.231). Here, the mechanicals parodically engage in “emplotment,” the ancient and Renaissance prudential deliberation about means and ends, which the mechanical arts surrounding drama production on the stage (*plat*) promoted (Turner 23). It is this moral and practical prudence, however, that the nobles lack, being too “sophisticated” to connect the play’s basic truth—the lament over the stymied course of true love—to their own recent toils of love. The mechanicals do a poor but honest job at entertainment. They artlessly mix earnestness with merrymaking, tragedy with comedy, offering the nobles a different kind of “love-in-idleness” that attempts to build community rather than romance.

One might object here that concerns about social progress are anachronistic and unwarranted by this scene of wedding festivities, tying knots in comedic union. After all, the nobles’ viewing of the mechanicals’ entertainment presupposes condescension on their part, and, moreover, they are impatiently awaiting bedtime (not unlike Christopher Sly, if I might add), which will joyfully consummate their marriages: as Theseus asks, “Is there no play/ To ease the anguish of a torturing hour?/ ... Say, what abridgement have you for this evening” (5.1.36-37). This need of a pastime to shorten the wedding evening underscores all the more, however, the plight of the nobility during ordinary days of leisured existence: the struggle against boredom. The framing structures of Boccaccio's *Decamerone* and Castiglione's *Cortegiano* both situate “a group of men and women anxious to find some way of passing the time” (Burke 142). The etymology of the word “pastime,” as Peter Burke observes, also testifies to this struggle:

In French, *passetemps* was a word coined in the fifteenth century and it has been argued that the new word expressed a new assumption, "that time was a substance which might be shaped by human will". In English, the word "pastime" is first recorded in 1490. At much the same time, at the court of Isabella d'Este, a contemporary described Carnival games as a means "to pass the time" ("*per passare il tempo*")... Montaigne commented on the French term *passetemps* that it implied that time was "something annoying and contemptible" ("*chose de qualité ennuyeuse et dedaignable*"). In similar fashion the English novelist and magistrate Henry Fielding observed towards the end of our period, "To the upper Part of Mankind Time is an Enemy, and . . . their chief Labour is to kill it". (142)

Certainly, the western tradition reveals a defense of relaxation going back to Aristotle in his defense of leisure, pleasure, and amusement: “happiness is thought to depend on leisure; for we

are busy that we may have leisure, and make war that we may live in peace” (*NE*, X.7.177b5, 1176b). In Roman times, Valerius Maximus, as a minority voice, wrote of *otium* as “legitimate rest or refreshment after exertion” (Vickers 35). During the Renaissance, while music, as a “thing to passe the time withal,” is “associated in *The Courtier* and other contemporary texts with the making of womanish or effeminate men, along with ‘other vanities’” (Parker 198), Sir Thomas Elyot’s *The Boke named the Governour* emphasizes that music “only serveth for recreation after tedious or laborious affairs,”—a view that Thomas Morley’s manual on music also endorses (Parker 196-97).

These last examples underscore, however, that music and other amusements depend on precedent, “more serious” studies. Despite the Carnival games played at the court of Isabella d’Este, the marquesa of Mantua (1474-1539), a major cultural and political figure of her time, lived by a stricter ethos, “spend[ing] her leisure hours in her *studiolo*, practicing *otium honestum*” (Vickers 125), surrounded by a series of “garden of vanity” paintings by Mantegna, based upon her outlines or *invenzioni* (123). One of them called “Minerva expelling the Vices from the garden of Virtue” well reflects the virtuous life she led as a ruler and patroness of the arts attracting many of the era’s finest artists and writers. Isabella d’Este instantiates the idea that the aristocratic prerogative of leisure comes with a duty to use it with honor, as Aristotle observes:

the enjoyment of good fortune and the leisure which comes with peace tend to make [men] insolent. Those then who seem to be the best-off and to be in the possession of every good, have special need of justice and temperance ... ; they above all will need philosophy and temperance and justice, and all the more the more leisure they have, living in the midst of abundance. (*Politics* VII.15.1334a4)

*Midsummer Night’s Dream*’s “garden of vanity” reveals delusions concerning love, political power, social hierarchy, and the self. The most honest thing in the play is the mechanicals’ desire and effort to please the nobles with worthy entertainment. Aside from humor, Shakespeare presents the mechanicals’ play within the play as a social commentary on the nobility. Although we can commiserate with the nobles in having to endure the artisans’ lamentable performance, there is something precious about the way the nobles “take it with humor”—not good-heartedly (as one would a children’s performance) but disparagingly, showing off their sophisticated wits at the expense of the mechanicals. To illustrate:

Theseus: A very gentle beast, of a good conscience.

Demetrius: The very best at a beast, my lord, that e'er I saw.

Lysander: This lion is a very fox for his valour.

Theseus: True; and a goose for his discretion.

Demetrius: Not so, my lord; for his valour cannot carry his  
discretion; and the fox carries the goose. (5.1.222-27)

The nobles here exhibit rhetorical somersaults around Aesop's fable about the fox and the lion. In so doing, they themselves illustrate its moral, "Familiarity breeds contempt," through their mocking of the tinker Snout as a "goose." For all their badinage about his "valour" and "discretion" or lack thereof, they exhibit none themselves in their lack of "ready wit," the ability "to joke in a tasteful way" (Aristotle, *NE*, IV.8.1128a10), an important feature of the virtuous person in social intercourse. Unwittingly, they end by "carr[ying] the goose."

This cavalier attitude of the leisure class ultimately prevents them from gaining moral insight into their own affective experience—flaws of civic leadership and self-knowledge. It is this affective disconnection that the women reproach in the men of *Love's Labour's Lost*, resulting in an unprecedented lack of coupling at the end of that early comedy. Like Berowne and his peers of Navarre's court, Theseus and his nobles must "unlearn their pretensions" (Brown 33) and strive to be "generous, ... gentle, ... humble" (*Love's Labour's Lost*, 5.2.617), taking a cue from Holofernes, one of the players in that comedy's parodic pageant of Nine Worthies. It is precisely in this affective power that the plebeians and the mechanicals and Cleopatra and Virgilia prove sovereign over the likes of Theseus and Coriolanus as the class and gender inferiors "sweat [in] labour/ To bear ... idleness so near the heart" (*Antony and Cleopatra*, 1.3.95-96). Drawing on the rich humanist discourse on idleness and work, Shakespeare offers to his era and ours expansive models of meaningful existence and activity beyond those perpetuating patriarchal power: the "heavenly mingle" (*Antony and Cleopatra*, 1.5.58) of work and play, rich internal life, domestic bonding, and community building.

## NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> All citations of Shakespeare refer to *The Norton Shakespeare*. I would like to thank Edmund Taft for his encouragement and the anonymous reader for his/her valuable comments, the impetus to turning out a much better study on the subject.

<sup>2</sup> Miola's essay on Roman piety is the most affirmative treatment of Virgilia I have found. Besides Miola, T. McAlindon affirms the effectiveness of Virgilia's silence in disarming Coriolanus in act 5: "Angrily, [Volumnia] perceives he is not listening, not even looking at her; that it is Virgilia he sees and who moves him..." (516). Virgilia is most often invoked as a foil to Volumnia's "thirst for blood," as Katharine Eisaman Maus does in her Norton introduction to the play (2788), where the sustained focus is Volumnia and her aggressive mothering of her son.

<sup>3</sup> See Cantor, 68: "[T]he distribution of wealth and privilege in Rome favors the growth of spiritedness among the patricians and works against it among the plebeians."

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